

LIFE ON THE OHIO
Switzerland County Historical Society

THE GREAT FLOODS

This week the Ohio River reached flood stage of 51 feet at Markland Dam. The gates and both locks are wide open allowing the water to pass through. We were fortunate the river did not reach the 60-foot level as it did in 1997 or worse the 80-foot level of 1937.

Floods along the rivers are a common occurrence, however, occasionally we experience what is called a 500-year flood. The 1937 flood was the worst for the Ohio River, the 1927 flood was the worst for the lower Mississippi and the 1993 flood was the worst for the upper Mississippi river.

Floodwaters in this area have passed the 60-foot mark 21 times in the 20th century. 1913 brought two severe floods to the Ohio valley, less than three months apart. On Jan. 14 the waters reached 62.2 feet, followed by a 69.9-foot flood, the third-highest flood in Ohio River history, and the worst in lives lost. The number of dead was 454, with 40,000 left homeless. Many Switzerland County towns suffered severe damage in this flood. Patriot was hit especially hard.

The granddaddy of Ohio River floods occurred January 26, 1937 when the river reached a depth of 79.9 feet, its highest-ever recorded level. An estimated 100,000 people were left homeless. Local damage reached \$20 million in 1937 dollars. In Ohio River towns from Pittsburgh to Cairo, Ill., 385 people were killed, 1 million were left homeless and property losses eclipsed the \$500 million mark.

At the '37 flood's crest, nearly one of every eight people in the Tristate were left homeless. Almost one-fifth of Cincinnati was covered by water. Indiana towns of Lawrenceburg, Aurora, Rising Sun, Patriot, Florence and Vevay were inundated.

The river passed 60 feet eight times between 1937 and 1964. The most recent was in 1997 when the river reached 64.7 feet.

We experienced the 1993 Upper Mississippi River flood first hand while living in Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

The 1993 flood will go down in history as one of the most significant and damaging natural disasters ever to hit the United States. Damages totaled \$15 billion, 50 people died, hundreds of levees failed, and thousands of people were evacuated, some for months. The flood was unusual in the magnitude of the crests, the number of record crests, the large area impacted, and the length of time the flood was an issue.

Heavy rain in the spring is normal for the Midwest. However, in the summer of 1993 the rain moved into the upper Midwest and stayed. During June through August 1993, rainfall totals surpassed 12 in most of the Midwest. More than 24 inches of rain fell on parts of Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska, with up to 38.4 inches in east-central Iowa. These amounts were approximately 200-350 percent of normal. From April 1 through August 31, precipitation amounts approached 48 inches

in east-central Iowa, easily surpassing the area's normal annual precipitation of 30-36 inches.

A critical factor affecting the record flooding was the near continuous nature of the rainfall. Many locations in the nine-state area experienced rain on 20 days or more in July, compared to an average of 8-9 days with rain. There was measurable rain in parts of the upper Mississippi basin on every day between late June and late July.

The magnitude and severity of this flood event was simply overwhelming, and it ranks as one of the greatest natural disasters ever to hit the United States. Approximately 600 river forecast points in the Midwestern United States were above flood stage at the same time. Nearly 150 major rivers and tributaries were affected. It was certainly the largest and most significant flood event ever to occur in the United States.

Tens of thousands of people were evacuated, some never to return to their homes. At least 10,000 homes were totally destroyed, hundreds of towns were impacted with at least 75 towns totally and completely under floodwaters. At least 15 million acres of farmland were inundated, some of which may not be useable for years to come.

Transportation was severely impacted. Barge traffic on the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers was stopped for nearly 2 months. Bridges were out or not accessible on the Mississippi River from Davenport, Iowa, downstream to St. Louis, Missouri a distance of 300 miles. The next open bridge below St. Louis was at Cape Girardeau some 130 miles downstream. Numerous interstate highways and other roads were closed. Ten commercial airports were flooded. All railroad traffic in the Midwest was halted. Numerous sewage treatment and water treatment plants were destroyed.

The Great Flood of 1993 was unusual in other respects. It was wide spread covering nine states and 400,000 square miles. Fifty deaths occurred as a result of the flood. Over 1,000 levees were topped or failed. Also, the flood was of extremely long duration lasting at some locations for nearly 200 days.

Cape Girardeau was experiencing a drought in 1993. They had all of the floodwater but none of the rain. Cornfields had half of the crop under water and the other half brown from drought. The terrain of Southern Missouri is low hills with small streams. Because of this it was common for towns as far as 25-30 miles from the river to be flooded. The floodgates at Cape Girardeau were closed for 180 days in 1993.

Cape Girardeau is about 50 miles above the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Fortunately the Ohio was unusually low in 1993 so the waters dropped below flood stage before reaching the Ohio.

As Mark Twain said a hundred years ago, "*A river cannot be tamed, curbed or confined....you cannot bar its path with an obstruction which it will not tear down, dance over and laugh at.*"

To view numerous local photos of the devastating floods of 1913 and 1937 visit the *Life on the Ohio* Museum when it opens in April.

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Greetings from Ohio River Mile 519.4